

New warden opens up Menard for viewing



May 21, 2014 • By Nick Mariano *Photos by Adam Testa, The Southern*

CHESTER -- A prison guard with a rifle in hand stood watch over inmates Tuesday in the East Cell House at the Menard Correctional Center.

Today, that guard or another will be in the same post ... and again tomorrow, and again the next day.

Visitors are ushered to the side when prisoners of the maximum-security prison are escorted to chow, the exercise yard or back to their cells.

Those in the yard are chatting, running on the track or waiting to play cards. In their cells, they watch television (which they pay for), read or sleep.

Tuesday was a day like many at the prison -- ironically peaceful, defying public perceptions of rampant violence, overcrowding or chaos.

"This is how it is most days," said Tom Shaer, director of communications for the Illinois Department of Corrections.

They did not appear to sugarcoat anything. They acknowledged violence happens. Weapons are found. Prisoners refuse to eat. Advocates deplore living conditions.

But as hard as it may be to believe, where there is danger there is also respect between those on either side of the cell bars.

(Continued next page)

The mural painted by inmates that lists those guards who served their country, as well as the officers who located an inmate to say good-bye as he was about to be freed, suggests that not all it is often portrayed.

Kim Butler sat at her desk facing a wall of pictures of past wardens, including Rick Harrington, who she succeeded in April to become the first woman to lead the prison for male inmates.

“Menard is a facility that is mysterious to people,” the warden said. “They may have driven past it. They may have known someone who has worked here or (has been) incarcerated here. I want people to have access.”

A mother of one from Carbondale and a 20-year veteran of the DOC, Butler said her immediate priority is to ensure the safety of staff and inmates.



Before her appointment, Butler was the assistant warden for programs. She ushered in a veterans' program for inmates, art classes and a correspondence program for degree-seeking prisoners.

While serious problems remain, an independent watchdog group, the John Howard Association, reported in February that the overall number of violent events dropped in 2013.

Serious assaults on staff rose from five in 2012 to eight in 2013, but the number of days the 3,700-inmate prison was on full or partial lockdown declined from 250 to 122.

In its report, the Howard Association praised administrators for changes to reduce tension, including an effort to put more inmates to work.

Butler welcomed the JHA report, though noted that assaults on staff were reported differently and that contributed to the increase.

(Continued on next page)

Still, work remains to be done, Butler said, not shying away from the challenges. Although the main complex is some 130 years old, other buildings are not, including one constructed in 2000.



Allegations are taken seriously, she said, including a recent blog that claimed two, young inmates had bedsores and others with mental illness were not receiving treatment they need.

“All the issues were taken very seriously and we are investigating and looking at everything he brought up,” Butler said. “If there are issues here we address them as we become aware of them.”

Although in an inherently dangerous job, Anthony Ferranto, a correctional officer for 13 years, said he does not feel he is in danger.

“It is a safe facility. You never know. That’s why we have to be diligent and aware constantly of what’s around us, but it is as safe as it can be,” he said.